

Stormy times ahead for human rights defenders in Armenia

HRWF (15.05.2015) - In the last 15 years, Armenia and the EU have been developing an increasingly close relationship going beyond co-operation to involve a significant measure of economic integration and a deepening political cooperation: from the EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1999) to the inclusion in the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004) and the Eastern Partnership (2009).

However, in January of this year, Armenia suddenly decided to join the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia. This political decision has had an immediate negative impact on the human rights situation. The "Eurasian values," as defined by Moscow, have quickly affected the work of the Armenian human rights activists. They have been suspected of being "foreign agents," they have been slandered and threatened. Defending LGBT rights is suddenly perceived as a betrayal of Armenian values and collaboration with Western powers to destroy the family, the cornerstone of the Armenian nation. Freedom of assembly has also been targeted and political activists have been arrested.

Since their first "AutoMarch" on 19 October last year, created on the model of the AutoMaidan in Kyiv, opponents to the current Armenian regime have been routinely stopped, beaten and arrested by the police during their peaceful demonstrations. Their cars have been heavily damaged by the law enforcement forces as several videos clearly show on YouTube. As in Kyiv during the EuroMaidan, the members of the Armenian movement demonstrate in cars to call for regime change.

The "Centennial without this Regime" movement and the "Founding Parliament" (FP), a civil initiative, are the driving forces of the socio-political opposition to the President of the Republic of Armenia behind the demonstrations.

Their events have always been peaceful and have remained within the limits of the law, leaders insist. Yerevan municipality recently authorised a series of rallies that were to start on 24 April but a crackdown on the two movements was decided by the regime on the basis of *suspicious of wrongdoings*.

On 7 April, ten apartments belonging to members of the movement and five offices were searched by the National Security Service and police Special Investigative Division. These searches were conducted on the sole grounds of a "suspicion of preparation for mass disturbances."

On 9 and 10 April 2015, the court of the administrative districts Kentron and Nork-Marash in Yerevan sentenced several leaders of the movement to two months' pre-trial detention for allegedly attempting to "organise mass disturbances" at a rally on 24 April; Jirayr Sefilyan, Garegin Chugaszyan, Varuzhan Avetisyan, Pavel Manukyan and Gevorg Safaryan. Hakobyan, accused of illegal possession of arms, was released on bail (€1,000) but the criminal prosecution against him goes on.

The lawyers representing Jirair Sefilian and other prominent members of the group announced their intention to appeal the court decisions regarding the custody of their clients at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg.

In a press conference on 15 April, lawyer Lusine Hakobyan reminded that Sefilyan had been a regular target of the authorities in the last 10 years. In 2006, he was accused of calling for a violent overthrow of the constitutional order and for illegally keeping his weapon after his demobilisation in 1998. In 2007, he was sentenced to one year and six

months imprisonment. On 2nd January 2013 the European Court of Human Rights recognised the unlawfulness of Sefilyan's detention and condemned the Armenian state to pay €6,000 euros to Sefilyan as financial compensation.

The European Union should be concerned about such developments in the human rights area and remain vigilant in its future relations with countries attracted by the Eurasian Economic Union, including Armenia, as it is obvious that Moscow is paving the way to a new cultural Iron Curtain between liberal democracies and autocratic regimes